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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the links among (1) schools' formal organizational structures; (2) the interactions of administrators and faculties; and (3) the patterns of thinking that grow from these interactions. These in turn have consequences for teacher-student interactions, and ultimately effect the cognitive development of students. Each of these levels of school functioning is nested within the next, in an organic unity, which accounts for the resistance of school to reform and innovation. The implications for educational research and practice is discussed, both in theoretical and practical terms. (Author)

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# The Institutional and Social Context of Teaching

Roland Tharp

Symposium on

*Extending Vygotskian Theory:*

*The Institutional and Cultural Context of Educational Practice*

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper discusses the links among 1) schools' formal organizational structures, 2) the interactions of administrators and faculties, and 3) the patterns of thinking that grow from these interactions. These in turn have consequences for 4) teacher-student interactions, and ultimately effect 5) the cognitive development of students. Each of these levels of school functioning is nested within the next, in an organic unity, which accounts for the resistance of schools to reform and innovation. The implications for educational research and practice is discussed, both in theoretical and practical terms.

This paper is drawn from two primary sources, where the topic is discussed in detail:

Tharp, R. G. & Gallimore, R. (1989). Rousing minds to life: Teaching and learning in social context. New York: Cambridge University Press.

O'Donnell, C. R. & Tharp, R. G. (in press). A theoretical model for community intervention. In: Bellack, A. S., Hersen, M., & Kazdin, A. E. (Eds.), International handbook of behavior modification and therapy, 2nd Ed., New York: Plenum Press.

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Extending Vygotskian Theory:  
The Institutional and Cultural Context of Educational Practice

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A great strength of the neoVygotskian structure of ideas is that psychological and social events are discussed with the same concepts, in a shared lexicon, and in a common web of meanings. These concepts are also of wide applicability: from the earliest levels of consciousness through the achievement of the greatest wisdom, on the mental plane; and on the social plane, from dyads to entire cultures.

Such concepts allow us to see parallels and isomorphisms, as well as discontinuities, in psychological structures and social structures. Having seen these relationships, we are empowered to prescribe remedies for conditions that have long vexed us.

The conservatism, not to say fierce resistance, of schools when faced with forces of change has been both puzzle and consternation for educational reformers. My topic is **The Institutional and Social Context of Teaching**. I hope to show that the processes of school instruction are reflected and supported in parallel structures at the school organizational level, and at the community, cultural and/or national level of concept meaning and political structures.

The most usual level of analysis in neoVygotskian studies of education is the teaching/learning interaction. Since the last century, "teaching" in North American classrooms has consisted only of providing tasks and assessing individual development--the infamous "recitation script" that has been characteristic of North American schooling, at least since the early 19th century. As we know from every review of teaching research, responsive teaching--that is, assisting performance of children by teachers--is seldom used

by teachers in classrooms. This must be changed: students cannot be left to learn on their own; teachers cannot be content to provide opportunities to learn and then assess outcomes; recitation must be de-emphasized, and responsive, assisting interactions must become commonplace in the classroom.

Teaching must be redefined as assisted performance. Teaching consists of assisting performance. Teaching is occurring when performance is achieved with assistance.

However, all such interactions take place in the context of the social organization of the schools. We need a theory not only of teaching, but of schooling.

#### Analyzing Schooling: The Activity Setting as Basis Unit for Analysis

The basic unit necessary for analyzing schooling and its society in neoVygotskian theory is the activity setting. Activity settings are events in which collaborative interaction, intersubjectivity, and assisted performance occur; they incorporate cognitive and motoric action within the objective features of the setting. The activity setting is the social process common to the participants from which cognitive processes and structures of meaning develop, and are therefore the units by which community and cultural life are propagated.

Because social science and psychological practitioners have typically separated these features, the activity setting concept requires some practice before its use is comfortable. However, the life of a school can be described in terms of its activity settings. Examples include whole-class settings, laboratory partnerships, cooperative learning small-groups, debates, drama rehearsals. Activity settings for adult members of school organizations include faculty committees, peer coaching groups, workshops, individual teacher consultation by outside experts, grade-level committee meetings, or curriculum revision groups.

As can be seen from those examples, it is common for activity settings to be nested. That is, depending on the purpose of analysis, one may consider a single classroom as an activity setting, or, for finer-grained analysis, several activity settings can be identified as operating within, or nested within, the class--the teacher-led small discussion group, the

student clean-up committee, the work-table for map-drawing. In the actual community, these levels sometimes operate in such smooth integration that boundaries are not discernible; but in other instances, the activity setting can re-form into nested components with sharp demarcations, as when the whole cooperating third grade classroom adjourns the rehearsal of its Thanksgiving Pageant, and begins its science lab groups.

This nestedness is characteristic of all community institutions, and indeed, as the community is nested within the larger context, all microsettings can be seen as nested within macrosettings, which themselves are ultimately nested in planet Earth.

#### The Re-Definition of Schooling

In 1972 Sarason made this point, and the situation has changed not one whit: "Schools are not created to foster the intellectual and professional growth of teachers. The assumption that teachers can create and maintain those conditions which make school learning and school living stimulating for children, without those same conditions existing for teachers, has no warrant in the history of man. That the different efforts to improve the education of children have been remarkably short of their mark is in part (due to) . . . ways of thinking, to a view of technology, to ways of training, and to modes of organization which make for one grand error of misplaced emphasis. . . ." (Sarason, 1972, pp. 123-124.)

#### Teaching, the Bureaucratic Organization and the Redefinition of Schooling

Little actual teaching occurs in schools. Teachers do not teach children. But then professors of education do not teach principals, principals do not teach grade-level chairs, curriculum specialists do not teach teachers. Educational administrators teach no one, and neither do educational researchers. The educational establishment is organized as a series of unconnected independent positions, each believing that somewhere below them, surely someone is teaching someone. Each position attempts to create educational opportunities for those down the chain--good textbooks, good workshops, even good performance objectives--but no one attends to assisting the performance of those objectives.

This state of affairs is now marching blindly and triumphantly into its third century.

The administrative/bureaucratic practice of assessing-and-directing is organically related to the classroom practice of assessing-and-directing the recitation script. At neither level is there sufficient assistance, responsiveness, joint productive activity nor the building of common meanings and values. Teachers have virtually no interaction with their supervisors, and when they do, are expected to "recite," be assessed, and receive directions. The recitation script is everywhere--in the classroom, in the board room, and in the principal's office. Supervision in schools should be re-defined as assisting performance in precisely the terms we used to define teaching.

#### Organizing Schools for Teaching

One of the duties of each individual in a school system should be to assist the performance of the person next down the line: the superintendent assists the principal, the principal assists the teacher, the teacher assists the pupil. This assistance, with its accompanying cognitive and behavioral development, should be the justifying goal of the school, and all other duties should be in its service.

The basic principle for the design of effective assistance is to marshal the sources that will assist the performance of those down the supervisory chain, and to eliminate the sources that hinder or obstruct that performance. Good design and management of assisted performance can be seen as the creation of appropriate activity settings.

Authority in the supervisory line should be used to create new activity settings in which joint productive activity will produce the assistance that will increase the competence of supervisees. All those who participate will be influenced, will be assisted, will develop a new intersubjectivity, and advance in the development of capacities to assist.

#### The Design of Activity Settings in Schools

In the typical school there are insufficient joint productive activities. Teachers, principals, curriculum specialists and other authorities direct their subordinates to

accomplish a task, but do not participate in the productivity. A basic condition for effective activity settings is "jointness" (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Without jointness, the supervisor cannot assist performance, affect cognitive structures of learners, or be affected by the emerging group intersubjectivity.

There are four basic principles that can guide school personnel in evaluating and improving the structure of activity settings. First, the assistor should at all times participate in at least one activity setting with the assistee(s). Second, the authority of the assistor should be used to organize activity settings, and to make resources of time, place, persons and tools available to them. Third, authority should not override the emerging intersubjectivity and problem solving of the activity's members. Fourth, every member of the school community should be engaged in some setting of joint productive activity.

#### Schools in the Context of Society

Schools are incorporated into the larger society and have that as their context, so that some of their activity settings are determined by the larger society. A major portion of this context is the socially-shared meaning of "school," a structure of meaning that is widely shared over all the communities and generations that have themselves been educated in the recitation script-dominated classroom and school.

The pervasiveness of this unfortunate meaning of school can be seen in the parallelisms among the recitation script, the instruct-and-assess methods of school management, and the typical treatment of schools by their directing political bodies. Just as teachers treat students in the recitation script, schools themselves are given certain "texts" to master, in the form of regulations and authorizations, and they are from time to time assessed or audited to test whether they are in correspondence with those texts. Little assistance, understanding, responsiveness, or genuine dialog occurs among policy makers and the schools. Just as the recitation-teacher responds to students, so the legislatures, school boards, and trustees respond to the administrators of their schools: if the assessment is "failed," the text is re-assigned; if the assessment is satisfactory, new texts

are assigned (new laws or regulations passed), and another round of assessment, reward and punishment rolls on.

One of the principal assessments that all schools must pass is that they meet the criteria for schools that are contained in the shared vision of the old-time school that we all have shared. For this criterion, any reform fails the assessment.

Teaching is nested within schools which is nested within society, each differing in scale but not in form, and each mutually supportive of the entire structure. Thus the larger society hatches the activity settings of classrooms, and it is classrooms that produce the problem-solving styles and the discourse-meanings that prepare new citizens to operate in society. This is a formidable structure indeed, and little wonder that it is conservative.

However, society itself is not a stable context. Society has changed, but not its conception of schools, even though they no longer provide activity settings that are microcosms of the contemporary and emerging workplaces of America. Indeed schools' activity settings, lagging behind the workplace, do not prepare students with the problem solving and literacy skills that will allow North American society to compete with others. The cooperative learning movement, as one contemporary example of intended reform, has some credibility with business and industry leaders who know well that teamwork is emerging as a necessary skill for corporate success. The shift in technology and management techniques demand a new complex of skills from today's school graduates. Does this mean that the cooperative movement will institute genuine reform in American education? Not at all. Cooperative learning will encounter the same massive inertia that all violations of the meaning of school meet. Does that mean that it will fail? Not necessarily: to the extent that social pressures are consistent and broad, it is possible to nudge schools forward. To the extent that a new vision of schooling as cooperative can be brought into citizen's discourse, then it is possible to see education streak forward.

Changing the meaning of school, the vision of school, the idea of school is the long term task for educational reform.